NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5814
FRED BROWN/NEW DELHI

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PAKISTAN PRESS FREEDOM

ANNCR:

IN PAKISTAN, THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN MARTIAL LAW AUTHORITIES AND PAKISTANI JOURANLIST CONTINUES, DESPITE THE IMPRISONMENT OF THIRTY NEWSPAPERMEN. VOA CORRESPONDENT FRED BROWN HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

THE CONFRONTATION BEGAN NEARLY TWO WEEKS AGO, WHEN THE PAKISTAN JOURNALIST UNION CALLED FOR A HUNGER STRIKE TO PROTEST THE CLOSURE OF A LAHORE URDU LANGUAGE NEWSPAPER SUPPORTING JAILED FORMER PRIME MINISTER ZULFIKAR BHUTTO. THE NEWSPAPER HAD BEEN ACCUSED OF PUBLISHING A STATEMENT BY MISTER BHUTTO'S WIFE IN DEFIANCE OF A BAN BY MARTIAL LAW AUTHORITIES OF PLANNING TO SHIFT HER HUSBAND'S TRIAL ON CHARGES OF A POLITICAL MURDER TO A MILITARY COURT WHERE AN APPEAL WOULD N O T BE POSSIBLE.

THE GOVERNMENT DENIED THE CHARGE, AND MISTER BHUTTO AND FOUR FORMER AIDES WERE SUBSEQUENTLY CONVICTED IN THE CASE BY A CIVIL COURT AND SENTENED TO HANG. THE APPEALS AGAINST THE CONVICTION ARE TO BE HEARD BY THE PAKISTAN SUPREME COURT LATER THIS MONTH.

PAKISTANI JOURNALISTS COMPLAIN THAT THE CLOSURE OF "MUSIWAT" SILENCED THE ONLY EFFECTIVE OPPOSITION NEWSPAPER IN THE COUNTRY. THE CALL FOR A HUNGER STRIKE WAS ISSUES AFTER NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE JOURNALIST UNION AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN PUNJAB BROKE DOWN. IN THEIR FIRST REACTION TO THE PROTEST, PUNJAB OFFICIALS EXPELLED THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNION TO KARACHI AND WARNED OTHERS OF MARTIAL LAW BANS AGAINST SUCH ACTIVITIES. WHEN THE PROTESTORS WENT AHEAD WITH THE HUNGER STRIKE ANYWAY, THE PARTICIPANTS WERE ARRESTED.

SO FAR, FIFTY EIGHT NEWSMEN HAVE BEEN DETAINED. OF THESE, THIRTY HAVE BEEN TRIED IN SUMMARY MILITARY COURTS AND HAVE RECEIVED PRISON TERMS OF VARYING DURATION. THE HEAVIEST PENALTY -- ONE YEAR AT HARD LABOR -- WENT TO NISAR USMANI, THE ACTING CHAIRMAN OF THE UNION. HOWEVER, THE GOVERNMENT'S TOUGH STAND DOES N O T APPEAR TO HAVE HALTED THE PROTEST MOVEMENT. DISPATCHES FROM PAKISTAN SAY TWO PEOPLE WERE JAILED FOR A YEAR AT HYDERABAD ON WEDNESDAY FOR SUPPORTING THE JOURNALISTS AND THAT TWO LABOR LEADERS WERE ARRESTED FOR TRYING TO LAUNCH A SYMPATHY STRIKE.

RESPONDING TO OUTSIDE CRITICISM OF ITS ACTIONS FROM SUCH GROUPS AS THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS INSTITUTE, THE PAKISTAN EMBASSY IN NEW DELHI ON MONDAY ISSUED A STATEMENT REAFFIRMING THE GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION. THE STATEMENT CONTENDED THAT THE BANNED DAILY "MUSIWAT" HAD MISCONTRUED THIS FREEDOM AS A LICENSE TO ENGAGE IN DISTORTION, FABRICATION, AND ABUSE. THE STATEMENT ALSO POINTED OUT THAT NO OPPOSITION PAPERS WERE PERMITTED DURING THE TIME THE BHUTTO REGIME WAS IN POWER.

WHILE IT IS TRUE THAT PAKISTANI NEWSPAPERS HAVE BEEN FREER TO PUBLISH OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS SINCE THE MILITARY TAKEOVER, NO STATEMENT CRITICAL OF THE MARTIAL LAW AUTHORITIES HAVE BEEN PERMITTED TO APPEAR.

SO FAR THE MILITARY GOVERNMENT HAS SHOWN NO SIGNS OF BACKING DOWN IN THE CONFRONTATION WITH THE JOURNALISTS. AND, ON THURSDAY (MAY 11), THE KARACHI EDITION OF MUSIWAT, WHICH HAD MANAGED TO KEEP PUBLISHING, WAS ALSO FORCED TO CLOSE DOWN AFTER THE GOVERNMENT WITHDREW PRINTING FACILITIES.

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